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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TAGS)

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SUBJECT: ISRAELI MFA POLITICAL RESEARCH BUREAU DISCUSSES
LEBANON AND SYRIA

Classified By: Political Counselor Marc J. Sievers for reasons 1.4 (b),
(d)

¶1. (C) POLOFF and NEA/IPA Desk Officer met with MFA's Political Research Bureau (INR equivalent) on October 14 to discuss recent developments in Syria and Lebanon. MFA analysts explained that lately the political atmosphere in Lebanon suggests progress toward resolving the political crisis. Some of the internal actors have realized they have mutual interests, but Syria and Saudi Arabia are also working to bring the sides together. When asked if there was potential for an improved posture vis a vis Israel, they explained that the moderate March 14 coalition cannot be ambitious toward the GOI because they don't want to antagonize Hizballah and upset the delicate balance that exists in Lebanon. They added, however, that March 14 is pragmatic and they do want a normalization process because a peace deal would resolve the Palestinian refugee problem in Lebanon, would neutralize a perceived threat from Israel, and would undermine Hizballah's role.

¶2. (S) MFA officials assessed that Hizballah is still rebuilding its military infrastructure in southern Lebanon, occasionally meeting resistance from villagers who do not want such materiel stored in their towns. Hizballah is not looking to do anything from the south that would provoke an Israeli attack, but it is working with Iran to strike Israeli targets abroad, possibly in Azerbaijan and Egypt. Moderate GOL leaders try to defuse tensions between GOI and Hizballah, doing so through military contacts as part of the UNSCR 1701 framework.

¶3. (C) According to MFA analysts, Syrian President Asad is very satisfied with the way he has improved ties with the U.S., Europe, and Saudi Arabia without major policy changes and he does not feel any immediate need to moderate his behavior. Instead he is waiting for a "grand deal" from Washington that he believes will return the Golan Heights, resolve the challenge of the Hariri Tribunal, and provide him substantial economic assistance. He does not expect the grand deal will come soon, however, and is focusing in the near term on improving Syria's bilateral relations with Washington and other key countries, as well as working to remove sanctions on Damascus. In the meantime, he knows he has negative cards that he can play to influence world leaders.

¶4. (C) Despite Asad's talk of seeking an agreement with Israel, it is unclear whether he has made a strategic decision to actually make peace. What he has learned from the West is that he can get dividends from the process itself without ever having to make a concession. For example, Asad has had a "pilgrimage of envoys" from the U.S. and Europe, which helped improve Asad's stature, regardless of the fact that these visitors were there to reprimand him. "To Asad the pilgrimage is the message."

CUNNINGHAM